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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PRISTINA 000714

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TAGS: KDEM PGOV PINR SOCI KV UNMIK

SUBJECT: KOSOVO: ELECTION OUTLOOK FOR SERBS BLEAK

Classified By: COM Tina Kaidanow for reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The decision, under heavy pressure from Belgrade, to opt out of November 17 central elections by members of moderate the Serbian List for Kosovo and Metohija (SLKM), the incumbent Kosovo Serb grouping in the Assembly, has opened the door for a less-desirable group of Serb politicians to take their place. With the certain likelihood of a Belgrade-ordered boycott, most Kosovo Serbs cling to the false hope of seeing these elections delayed. At the end of the day, Serb candidates who are willing to participate in the elections - however unpopular and undesirable they may be - will likely win seats in the Kosovo Assembly, even with only a handful of votes from relatives and associates. Key questions remain on what to do about current Serb-majority municipalities, where microscopic Serb parties or even Albanian candidates may claim victory as a result of the Belgrade-inspired boycott; UNMIK is considering its options.  
END SUMMARY.

MODERATES OUT...

¶2. (C) As a result of heavy pressure from Belgrade, all incumbent Serb members of the Kosovo Assembly have bowed out of the upcoming November 17 central elections. Chief among them is Oliver Ivanovic, leader of the Serbian List for Kosovo and Metohija (SLKM) and the highest-profile moderate Kosovo Serb leader. Also opting out is SLKM member Randjel Nojkic -- the only Serb officially participating in the Kosovo Assembly via his chairmanship of the Communities Committee. The rest of the SLKM list has followed these two out of the race, including Vesna Jovanovic, Goran Bogdanovic, and other moderates. Ivanovic and Jovanovic told USOP they decided not to participate in no small part due to pressure from Belgrade. Ivanovic told us on two recent occasions that he had received threats and warnings not to participate, in addition to being followed by CCK representatives while traveling around Kosovo. He also reported that potential SLKM candidates were threatened in the eastern Kosovo Serb-majority areas of Partes and Ranilug.

...REPLACEMENTS IN

¶13. (C) In the place of the departed moderates will stand a group of untried and/or disgraced politicians, none of whom has a discernible constituency. The most visible among them is current Minister for Returns Branislav Grbic, head of his own recently-formed New Democracy Party. Grbic holds little stature among Kosovo Serbs; his arrest August 7 after a scuffle with police officers in the Serb enclave of Gracanica has made him the butt of many jokes. Former Minister for Returns Slavisa Petkovic, regarded by many as a criminal after his dismissal by PM Ceku on suspicion of corruption, is leading his Alliance of Independent Social Democrats of Kosovo and Metohija into the polls. Joining them on the registration list are Slavisa Miric and Mihailo Scepanovic, who have in the past been associates of both Grbic and Petkovic, but who have never held office and are also widely distrusted as perceived opportunists merely looking for ways to empower and enrich themselves and their cronies.

¶14. (C) The only truly moderate Serb in the race is Slobodan Petrovic, leader of the tiny Independent Liberal Party (SLS), who has close ties to Oliver Ivanovic. (Note: This election is the first for SLS. End Note) Petrovic told us September 24 that he will participate regardless of pressure from Belgrade, but explained that he and his supporters receive threats "every day" by hardliners. According to Petrovic, some of his potential supporters have been told they will lose their Belgrade-funded jobs if they vote. He vowed to press on nonetheless, and promised a campaign focused on economic issues and the benefits of participation in government for Kosovo Serbs. Petrovic told us that he expects to have a full list of 17 candidates on the ballot. SLS Party Secretary Petar Miletic, who will organize the campaign, told us that the party intends to avoid pressure

PRISTINA 00000714 002 OF 002

with an unobtrusive campaign that relies on word-of-mouth.

NO ONE VOTING

¶15. (C) While expectations for Serb turnout among most observers were never high before the election process began, there is even less reason for optimism now. Politicians, journalists, analysts, and everyday Serbs have all told us since September 12 that they expect no Serbs to vote, and that the list of candidates, in the words of one observer, is "scandalous." Among Kosovo Serbs, there exists a widely-held, though specious, belief that the elections will be delayed. On September 20, both Nojkic and Rada Trajkovic, head of the Serb National Council (SNC) Gracanica branch, told us in separate meetings that although neither expects any Serbs to vote, they do expect a delay in the elections. On September 27, Budimir Nicic, director of the Caglavica Media Center, told poloff he assumed the elections would be delayed; he was disappointed when told that a delay was not likely. These comments reflect a near-universal hope held by the majority of Serbs we have spoken with in recent weeks. Some have admitted that belief in a delay reflects a desire to put off thinking about the unpleasant reality of final status and independence.

SPEAKING OUT

¶16. (C) From some Serbs, none of whom is participating in the elections, there has been public criticism of Belgrade's discouragement of participation in Kosovo elections. During a public debate September 27, Nojkic said several times that "we (SLKM) are the legitimate representatives of Kosovo Serbs and not Belgrade." Nojkic and Trajkovic have been publicly critical of Belgrade's position, along with Novo Brdo mayor Petar Vasic. On September 25, Oliver Ivanovic gave an interview to the Serbia-based Evropa Weekly, in which he said that a Serb boycott would be a mistake, with the price paid by Serbs in isolated enclaves south of the Ibar; there is general agreements among the critics that non-participation can only harm Kosovo Serbs and make an already difficult

situation worse. Ivanovic also told us privately on September 18 that Belgrade's push for a boycott showed that the DSS-led government was willing to cause a crisis in Kosovo before upcoming (but as-yet unscheduled) elections in Serbia.

COMMENT

¶7. (C) Given the approach of final status, the evidence of increasing control exerted over Kosovo Serbs from Belgrade, and the impending electoral boycott, the SLKM moderates, mainstays of the Kosovo Serb political landscape since 2001, may soon disappear from the Kosovo political scene. In their place, at least some of the candidates that are running will likely be elected, at least at central level, though the number of Serb votes cast will be minimal. The key issue remains what to do about existing Serb-majority municipalities where most Serbs refuse to run or vote, creating the problematic specter of newly-elected Serb or Albanian parties who insist they won the locality even with just a modicum of votes. UNMIK is still considering whether to impose a voter threshhold for municipal elections or employ some other approach; each bears its own disadvantages, and it may well be that UNMIK refrains from any decision until the effect of the Serb boycott is fully clear post-election. End Comment.

KAIDANOW